

# OTOLITHS

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POET-EDITORS/ 16

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Adam Fieled is a poet currently based in Philadelphia. He has released three print books: *Opera Bufo* (Otoliths, 2007), *When You Bit...* (Otoliths, 2008), and *Chimes* (Blazevox, 2009), and many chaps, e-books, and e-chaps. His work has appeared in journals like *Tears in the Fence*, *Upstairs at Duroc*, *Jacket*, *Great Works*, *the Argotist*, and in the *&Now Anthology* from Lake Forest College Press. A magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, he also holds an MFA from New England College, and an MA from Temple University, where he is finishing his PhD.

## **What is (or has been) your favorite editing project and why?**

My favorite editing project has been the series of "Waxing Hot" dialogues I've done on PFS Post, with poets like Gabriel Gudding, Robert Archambeau, Barry Schwabsky, Steve Halle, Amy King, Lars Palm, and Michael Tod Edgerton. Working with Gabe Gudding, in particular, was a tremendous challenge and an

honor, and several of this series have been re-published in the UK print journal *Tears in the Fence*.

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### **On the Possibilities of Multi-Media Readings**

In 2004 and 2005, a group of young artists who called themselves the Philly Free School staged a series of performances at the Highwire Gallery, in the now-demolished Gilbert Building on Cherry Street, Philadelphia. The stated goal of these performances was “multi-media”: as such, they involved poetry, music, fiction, films, and different hybrid/mutant versions of these. What I want to address, specifically, is the poetry aspect of these performances. These seem relevant to me now because multi-media presentations of poetry are, to many, significantly more interesting than standard poetry readings, which are (I would argue) an impoverished form of public expression. What constitutes the impoverishment of poetry readings as public art events? Let’s put the question in different terms: what does a poetry reading offer an average audience?

An audience at a standard poetry reading is offered an anti-spectacle— a single man or woman, reading from sheets or a book, often looking down at this book while intermittently gazing up at his or her audience. Why look at something or someone static, and (for the most part) inexpressive? This is the first level of impoverishment. Then, as to the contents of poems read in a public context: are most poems compelling enough, as works of literature, to merit public airing? The truth is that most serious poems do not read that well out loud— poems (good ones) contain enormous amounts of compressed data, which necessitates slow, ocular engagement. Lines that need to be read three or four times to be properly processed pass with such rapidity, in a reading context, that they might

as well be Greek as English. Moreover, attendees have two options— to make an earnest attempt to understand things instantly, or to drift off into reverie. The latter has consistently been my choice (and I have, fortunately or unfortunately, sat through dozens of readings).

But the Philly Free School artists (of which I was one) started from the presupposition that poetry could be mixed with Artaud; that public poetry is, in fact, better as a side-dish than as a main course; and that the possibilities of “spectacles” were (and remain) more exciting than more conventional poetry contexts. As such, the Philly Free School shows (which were well-attended but received little media coverage) presented, in general, little in the way of conventional poetry performances; poetry was mixed with video and music to create novel effects. I was proud to contribute to these performances, because they had not only young energies but principles behind them. While I would not deny that results were mixed (some ideas came off, some did not), I have yet to see another concentrated attempt to make poetry multi-media in a public forum. We were using artful language as *texture*, the way a painter might use brushstrokes, and an inquiry into this usage (language-as-texture) revealed untapped possibilities as regards making poetry interesting to audiences, who may or may not find poetry interesting to begin with.

When language is used as texture, as a constituent part of a spectacle that also includes sound and images, the audience (ideally) feels itself immersed or engulfed in a dynamic collage; as such, this kind of performance is an extension of the Modernist ethos. Fractured things can be more compelling than wholes; this was one tenet that motivated Pound, Eliot, and the rest. For an audience, sitting in a darkened room (and the Highwire offered two main spaces, a conventional gallery space and a warehouse space), this sense of brokenness could be interpreted many ways, but the essential thing for us was to present something that was dynamic, rather than static. The most elaborate of these presentations involved music, images, and poetry at once; while it would be reasonable to question whether the total effect was bombastic or not, the responses we received encouraged us to believe that what we were doing was

significantly more exciting than an average poetry performance. Live poetry, I would argue, only works as texture to begin with; it is in the mix of things that live poetry comes alive. In the specific performances that I was personally involved with, I did, in fact, read entire poems; if I had it to do over again, I would not. It would have been substantially more appropriate to read fragments or even to improvise. The video collages were put together from foreign movies, Internet, music video, and photography bits. The musical elements alone were entirely improvised. Although I am proud of what the Philly Free School accomplished, it was merely a beginning. Thinking about it now, we could have been much more rigorous. Our ideas of spectacle were naïve, and needed development.

What would a completely successful poetry spectacle, in the Artaudian sense, look like? Artaud, of course, became famous for his idea/ideal of the Theater of Cruelty; a spectacle that confronts an audience with its own mortality, in an unflinching, persistent way. What kind of poetry fragments could add, textually, to such a spectacle? It seems to me that the poetry would have to be written specifically in conjunction with, specifically for, the music and the images. They would have to function, in other words, *dramatically*, as carriers of a certain kind of drama, just as dialogue in a theater production does. What can poetry contribute that mere dialogue cannot? Poetry has in its arsenal a capacity for incantatory power that dialogue does not; an ability to build, to create rhythms, melodies, and cadences that dialogue cannot. Anaphora is one method by which this kind of fragment could work; rhyme is another. This is texture that creates stimulation; with other elements, the potentiality for genuine spectacle, cohesive spectacle (rather than naïve, haphazard spectacle) arises. As to what the spectacle addresses, there is no real limitation, other than the impulse to compel attention, hold it, and overwhelm at once. Certainly the apocalyptic conflicts in the Middle East, our flagging domestic economy, and the status of the environment are all fertile (pardon my irony) ground.

Then, there are things standing in the way of this kind of spectacle: time and budgets are big ones. Many poets just skirt insolvency; serious spectacle

(unfortunately) often involves serious funds. The Philly Free School were lucky with this, more so than we realized; the Highwire let us use the space for free (though they took a cut of the door). But to come up with ample space, time, and funds is a real challenge, which cannot be solved overnight. It may come down to a collective, like the Philly Free School, to make this happen, if it does ever happen. To my mind, it would be a tragedy if it does not. There are, in general, too few poetry readings that have any capacity to stimulate, and too many that wind up being “snooze-fests.” The irony, for one working in an experimental context, is that avant-garde poetry readings tend to be even more boring than mainstream ones— abstruse poetry out loud, which shuns narrative, is more difficult to follow, and often registers as little better than gibberish. But I will simply say, for myself, that the desire to create a genuine spectacle with poetry has not perished, and I hope other kindred spirits are “waiting in the wings.”

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